



## Victoria-Vanuatu Physician Project

*Cooperating with the people of Vanuatu to improve health care since 1991*

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## Final Salusalu – Tanna, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

### REPORT by Drs. Eugene Leduc and Lisa Veres

We flew directly from Victoria to Vanuatu, with a one night layover in Sydney. As soon as we stepped from the air-conditioned plane into the hot sun and organic humidity of Vanuatu, we knew we were returning to something very familiar. One ceiling fan twirled in the dimly lit Port Vila airport arrivals hall as 100 passengers quietly sweated in the immigration line. Two, seriously methodical customs officers, sitting high in their glass booths, carefully reviewed the passport and landing cards, then with a flourish of rubber stamps, admitted another tourist.

When it came to our turn, the officer flipped open my passport and saw my 2011 Vanuatu work visa. His face broke into a big smile, “Welcome home!” he said.

Our return to Vanuatu after 3 years did feel like a homecoming and “wan bigfela” family reunion. Even in the capital city of Port Vila, we would try our rusty Bislama pidgin in tentative conversations with taxi drivers, hotel staff and others who would invariably smile, mention some family connection to Tanna, and welcome us back. One day, we were followed into a shop by a woman who turned out to be the mother of a small girl that we had treated on Tanna just before we left in 2011. She had been working at a sidewalk Digicel booth and had recognized us as we walked by. She was happy to see us again and we were glad to find out that her daughter’s bad leg infection had healed, but instead of proceeding with the skin grafting we had arranged in Port Vila, it looked like the mother and daughter took advantage of the medical evacuation to escape Tanna, start a new life in Port Vila and ironically, use traditional Tanna “leaf” medicine to heal the daughter’s leg!

Arriving on Tanna Island, we were greeted at the small airport by Doctor Jeff and Karla Unger and their two little girls. We piled our luggage and ourselves into the back of the Doctor’s pick-up truck and drove straight to the Doctor’s House on hospital hill. Dr. Mike Pilgrim, his wife Lorna, and Dr. Colin Tamboline and his wife, Joyce had also just arrived from Canada. Between the Doctor’s House, the Doctor’s one-room guest-house, and the 2-bedroom Ol Frens Guesthouse, all us doctors managed to stay close together on hospital hill, rather than scatter to other guest houses and resorts on the island.

Within a few minutes of arriving, we could not resist an immediate visit to the hospital itself and met many of the staff we had last seen 3 years ago. There were lots of hugs and kisses. One (smaller) nurse, Roslynne, screamed with joy and jumped into Lisa’s arms. Everyone looked well. The hospital itself looked almost exactly the same. Over the next few days, while preparing for Monday’s final “salu salu” (going-away party), we continued to meet more and more old friends and catch up on their families, their new pikininis, etc. It really was like a big family reunion!

Many people would ask us “Why are you leaving?” “Why is a Canadian doctor not going to come here again?” It was interesting to see how little people knew about the ViVa Project. Many thought that we were financed by the Canadian government. Some assumed we were part of a much bigger non-governmental agency like World Vision. Some people thought the Vanuatu government was responsible for ending the ViVa Project.

Unexpectedly one morning, a group of six traditional chiefs arrived at the Doctor’s House. They had travelled from the middle of the island to talk with us about their concern that the ViVa Project was ending. They had written a letter to the Prime Minister and gave a copy to us.

We all sat on the ground in the shade of a frangipani tree. With heartfelt emotion and a strange mixture of traditional and modern-themed beliefs, the Chiefs (through a translator) cited the long-time connection between their people and the USA and Canada. This, they said, started at the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War when Vanuatu played an important role in support of the Americans to defeat the Japanese. They mentioned also their prophet, Prince Phillip, whom some of them had personally met. They seemed to consider Canada as part of the USA, were lamenting the end of the ViVa program, and were petitioning the Government of Vanuatu to continue to allow Canadian doctors to come to Tanna. “We pray for this,” they told us. It was touching to witness their genuine concern.

A senior ni-Van surgical resident, Dr. Basil, flew over to Tanna from Port Vila at the same time as we did. He travelled with Dr. Annette, another senior ni-Van resident who had recently worked for a year on Tanna. Together, us ViVa Doctors and Dr. Anette and Basil spent several hours discussing the doctor shortage in Vanuatu, the tight budget, and the problems providing a doctor for the island of Tanna. Dr. Basil told us that he was tasked by the Health Minister to come up with a plan for physician coverage on Tanna after we leave. His plan is to have two senior ni-Van residents spend 2 – 4 weeks on Tanna in overlapping rotations for the next 6 months. After that, there was hope that residents will come over for longer periods and, that eventually, a permanent doctor would be able to come to Tanna.

He re-assured us that this plan had the backing of the Minister of Health and a budget. We also discussed details such as how the residents would assume occupation of the Doctors House. We finally concluded that this was the best arrangement that could be verbalized with any degree of certainty at this time.

We decided to cement this new agreement with traditional kava. Some hospital staff had arranged a special kava night at the white sand beach north of Lenakel. In proper fashion, we arrived before dinner (the kava works best on an empty stomach) and before sunset. The kava bar was the usual pandanas hut with grass roof, but also, some local women, in their bright island dresses, had decorated a food stand with flowers and leaves, and offered a variety of fish, laplap, manioc, pineapple, and other food to purchase along with the kava. While the children played on the beach, the adults knocked back one or two (or more?) shells of kava. We all agreed that this was better tasting, “cleaner” kava than usual. After the first peppery, dirt-flavored shots hit the throat, the mouth and tongue quickly felt a bit numb. Over the next hour, we sat on the beach watching the setting sun and contemplating the end of the ViVa Project, feeling very relaxed and confident in the ability of the Vanuatu government to assume independence over this vestige of medical colonialism.

Now the biggest task was to sum everything up in a speech at the salu salu. Colin, who has a knack for speaking Bislama, offered to do this. He spent hours composing a speech and getting feedback from the rest of us. The speech explained how ViVa was a grass roots project, not funded by Government, but funded by the doctors-themselves and a few generous supporters in Victoria. He explained that we were very sad to announce that due to a shortage of doctors in Victoria, we could no longer supply a doctor to Tanna. He said that Tanna was lucky to recently have the presence of several good ni-Van doctors, that the Ministry of Health had a plan to ensure there was always a doctor on Tanna and that they will be good doctors. He thanked the people of Tanna for all their support to the ViVa Doctors for the last 24 years and asked them to support the ni-Van residents so that they will want to come back and stay. He ended his speech by saying it was the friendliness of the ni-Van people that kept Canadian doctors coming to Tanna and that all our hearts still belong on Tanna.

The preparations for the Salu Salu began days before. The ViVa doctors paid for a pig, a goat, fresh fish, and other food. Starting early Monday morning, hospital staff and other local women roasted and prepared the feast. Other staff decorated the hall and set up a sound system. People started arriving early in the day and setting down in the shade of the hospital trees. Over 50 men, women, and children from the traditional village of Yakel arrived and prepared for a “kastam” (traditional) dance.

When the Minister of Health and entourage of government officials arrived, the doctors were introduced to them and together we formed a procession to the celebration hall. The kastam chief, representing all the Chiefs of Tanna stood up and welcomed the Health Minister, gave him some kava root, thanked the ViVa doctors, then presented the Chief’s petition to the Government.

When the Yakel dancers marched single file into the centre of the field, wearing their traditional costume (which is almost nothing!), it was a very stirring sight. They had travelled all the way to the hospital to pay tribute to us. When they started dancing in the hot sun, we all had lumps in our throats. The men sang, stamped their feet in rhythm, and clapped. The women circled around them singing, and waving palm fronds. They put on a wonderful show in which Jeff and Karla’s daughters donned grass skirts and joined in. Some of the hospital staff and Lorna, Joyce, and Lisa also joined in the dancing.

Afterwards, inside the hall, several speeches were made thanking ViVa and its doctors. Colin’s speech was very well received. The Health Minister responded with promises to make good on Dr. Basil’s plans. Six young people, led by one of the hospital nurses, sang a song they had composed thanking ViVa doctors. It made many people cry. A special ViVa commemorative plaque was unveiled on the hospital wall with the names of every ViVa doctor etched in. More gifts were exchanged.

When the speeches and ceremony were finished, all the dignitaries including ViVa doctors lined up in a receiving line to shake hands with almost everyone who attended. There were a lot of tearful farewells and hugs between ViVa Doctors and friends and we all promised to make a return visit, “Lukim yu bak agin!”

Eugene Leduc  
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February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015